



## Get Real

### Using Authentic Materials to Engage Adult Learners

By Don Harting  
Editor

Egg cartons, yogurt containers, and toothpaste tubes can be worked into lesson plans. Val Forbes, a volunteer tutor in Rio Rancho, N.M., can even build a riveting English lesson around a McDonald's® coffee cup. Says Forbes: "The sky's the limit with everyday items."

Kyna Moser faced a creative challenge last summer. A tutor and program director at Literacy Source in Seattle, Wash., Moser had been assigned to tutor an English-as-a-second-language (ESL) student in his 40s who tested at the beginning reading level. Although the student worked as a cook, he showed no interest in learning to read recipes. He complained of getting lost on long car trips, however.

A light bulb clicked on in Moser's head. She had been impressed with how easy it is to use MapQuest, the Internet-based directions service, to plan routes across town. Her idea: use MapQuest to help this student learn to read.

Moser began by using the MapQuest Web site ([www.mapquest.com](http://www.mapquest.com)) to plan

a route that would take her student from home to work, something relevant to his daily life. She printed out the directions and brought the printout to their next tutoring session. The student immediately recognized the names of many streets he passed every day.

Moser was delighted with the result.

"He was really excited at first, because these were directions from his home to his work," Moser recalls. "He definitely had ownership" of the learning material.

In this way, Moser rediscovered what many experienced instructors already know: workbooks have their place, but when it comes to engaging an adult learner's interest, it's hard to beat real-life materials.

Sometimes called "authentic" or "contextualized," real-life materials are those that a student encounters in everyday life but that weren't created for educational purposes. They include newspapers, magazines, and Web sites, as well as driver's manuals, utility bills, pill bottles, and clothing labels.

### Backed by Research

Tutors and classroom teachers have been building lesson plans around real-life materials for years. Now the practice is backed by research — a recently completed five-year study conducted by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) confirms that bringing the lives, needs, and interests of students into the classroom is an integral part of best practice.

Beginning in 1998, the Literacy Practices of Adult Learners Study (LPALS) looked at how adults' literacy practices changed after they attended literacy classes. Researchers found that students who participate in classes that include real-life materials and activities are more likely to say they had started new literacy practices or had increased the amount of time spent engaging in literacy practices outside of school. Researchers concluded that instructors should increase the use of real-life literacy activities and texts in their lessons.

Victoria Purcell-Gates, the study's principal investigator and a professor in the Department of Language and Literacy at the University of British Columbia, says real-life materials are effective because "they tap into that basic natural drive to communicate." For example, a woman who shows little interest in reading workbook exercises may suddenly become excited about reading her children's report cards, Purcell-Gates says.

## Challenging but Fun

For practitioners in the classroom, integrating real-life materials into



lesson plans can be challenging, but it also can be fun. Patricia Sproull, a part-time ESL instructor at North Georgia Technical College in Clarkesville, Ga., enjoys bringing second-hand garments to class. She buys them for \$1 apiece at the local thrift store and uses the labels to teach English vocabulary along with basic life skills.

Last spring, Sproull distributed to the 10 students in her class a variety of men's shirts and women's blouses. She started teaching basic words like *sleeve*, *collar*, and *button*. Then she explained the difference between *cotton*, *polyester*, and *wool*, as well as the meaning of *bleach*, *line dry*, and *machine wash*. She ended with a quick geography lesson based on the country of origin marked on each label.

"The interest level was very high, because it was very hands-on," Sproull reports. "Each person had a shirt or a blouse. They felt it was something they needed to know."

Gwen Gunnell, a tutor and program director working in Camp Verde, Ariz., helps the mostly Spanish-speaking adults in her small group compile their weekly grocery lists using food ads inserted in their local newspaper. Each week, Gunnell has her students bring the free insert to class. Then she encourages students to look through the insert and create shopping lists for things they might want to buy.

This activity helps students learn vocabulary, practice numeracy skills, and save money. It's common for Gunnell to encounter one or more of the students — carrying their shopping lists — at the grocery store after class.

## Formidable Obstacle

Those who would like to see real-life materials more widely used have encountered a formidable obstacle:



Name	Price per (unit)	Number of (units)	Total Price
Potatoes	\$ .59 per pound	5	\$2.95
Milk	\$2.69 per gallon	1	\$2.69
Large Eggs	\$ .79 per dozen	2	\$1.58
<b>TOTAL COST</b>			<b>\$7.22</b>

the current emphasis on measuring student progress by standardized test scores. "That kind of policy tends to discourage teachers from using authentic materials," Purcell-Gates says. Many adult literacy instructors believe that basing lessons on real-life materials and achieving measurable student progress are mutually exclusive.

"It's a widespread perception, but I don't think it's true," Purcell-Gates observes. "You do need to know how to combine skills instruction with authentic reading and writing. It takes thought and planning."

If you're ready for an exciting new teaching challenge, the resource list on the next page will help you get started.

## References

- Purcell-Gates, V., Degener, S., Jacobson, E., & Soler, M. (2002). "Impact of authentic literacy instruction on adult literacy practices." *Reading Research Quarterly*, 37, 70-92.
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